

GUIDE FOR REVIEWING SBIR PHASE I PROPOSALS

Conflict of Interest: It is imperative that SBIR avoid even the **appearance** of conflict of interest in panel deliberations. Therefore, you must disqualify yourself as a reviewer or panel discussant for any proposal where 1) the applicant or consultants (if any) is employed at your home institution; 2) you served either as thesis advisor, postdoctoral advisor or a collaborator on a research project or coauthor on a joint publication with the applicant within the past four years; 3) you acted or will act as a paid consultant to the company, or will gain some benefit from the project; or 4) you have any affiliation or financial interest in the firm or the investigators submitting this proposal. If any of the above situations apply, please notify the SBIR Office at 202/401-4002 so another reviewer can be assigned. If you have a situation about which you are uncertain, please contact the SBIR office for an opinion.

Confidentiality: The Department of Agriculture receives research proposals in confidence and is responsible for protecting the confidentiality of their submission and contents. For this reason, confidentiality must be maintained -- therefore DO NOT copy, quote, or otherwise use material from this proposal. If you believe that a colleague can make a substantive contribution to the review, please consult us before contacting your colleague. When you complete the review, **please destroy this proposal or bring it with you to the panel meeting and leave it with the SBIR Office at the conclusion of the panel meeting.**

Reviews: The SBIR program will be utilizing the new Web-Based Peer Review System (PRS) that has been developed by USDA-CSREES. Information about the PRS system is contained in the cover letter that accompanies the proposals that have been sent to you for review.

If you are accustomed to reviewing academically-oriented proposals, you will find SBIR proposals to be different; they are narrowly oriented, have a more applied focus, and most deal with a product or service. You may have expert knowledge of the subject, or you may be able to judge the proposal only in a general way. Both judgments are important. The following points should be considered in preparing your review.

Scientific and Technical Feasibility: This is the most important criteria for ranking proposals **and should carry twice the value of the other items.** Are the stated objectives logical and will they lead toward proving the feasibility of the approach or concept? Proposals should concentrate on those aspects of the research that will significantly contribute to establishing technical feasibility. Discuss the scientific and technical quality of the research plan. Is the approach valid, relevant and innovative? The most useful reviews for both the peer panel and the applicant point out the proposal's strengths and weaknesses and include specific criticisms that you feel are warranted.

Importance of the Problem: Briefly discuss the importance of the problem or opportunity and the anticipated economic or social benefits of the proposed research. In your opinion can the proposed work be judged to be in the public interest by satisfying one or more of the following objectives: 1) develop sustainable agricultural production systems; 2) protect natural resources and the environment; 3) create a safe, nutritious and affordable food supply; 4) develop value-added food and non-food products from agricultural materials; 5) enhance global competitiveness; and 6) enhance economic opportunity and quality of life, especially for people in rural areas.

Investigator and Resource Qualifications: Discuss the principal investigator's qualifications and those of his/her staff and consultants (if any). Do they have the necessary training to carry out the experimental plan? If the PI is currently employed by an employer other than the small business submitting this proposal (e.g., university), is it clear that the PI would be employed for a minimum of 51% of his (her) time by the small business during the period of the grant? (While the PI must work more than one-half of his/her time for the small business during the entire grant period, there is no minimal time requirement for what percentage of the PI's time is spent working on the proposed research.) Is the necessary instrumentation available, or is it

obtainable within the time and budget constraints of Phase I? Are adequate facilities available that the small business either owns or controls for the duration of the grant through a rental or lease arrangement? If a consultant or sub-contractor is involved, is there a letter from him (her) verifying his (her) willingness to participate in the project? If a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA) exists, is there a letter from the CRADA partner verifying the existence of the CRADA agreement? For an applicant to gain full credit in the review process for the involvement of consultants, sub-contractors or CRADA partners, letters verifying these arrangements must be attached to the proposal.

Budget: Comment only if you feel one or more budget items are unclear, inappropriate, or substantially insufficient or excessive. There are two budget items you do not need to address. First, SBIR applicants are allowed by law to request a small fee or profit (not to exceed 7%) because they are for-profit organizations. They do not have to specify how these funds will be spent. Secondly, Congress has exempted the USDA SBIR program from any restrictions on indirect cost reimbursement rates. If an SBIR applicant has previously negotiated an indirect cost reimbursement rate with government auditors they are required by law to use that same rate in all grant applications. If they do not have a previously negotiated rate, they are free to ask for whatever rate they feel that they can justify. For small business firms, indirect cost rates of over 100% are not uncommon.

Hazardous Procedures and Ethical Considerations: When a proposal involves potentially hazardous materials or biological agents, comment on potential or actual problems and how the principal investigator would provide protection. If the proposal involves 1) recombinant DNA or RNA research, 2) use of vertebrate animals, or 3) human subjects, is the Assurance Statement (Form CSRS-2008) attached to the proposal?

Format: Proposal guidelines call for 1 inch margins with font size no smaller than 11 point. If you feel the proposal has exceeded these limits, you may wish to comment on this fact in your review. Proposals are also limited to 25 pages but this page limit does not include letters from consultants or subcontractors, letters of recommendation/endorsement, the Assurance Statement Form (Form CSREES-2008) or the NEPA Exclusion Form (Form CSREES-2006). These materials plus any other additional materials should be placed in an appendix. Reviewers are not asked to read more than 25 pages and thus if the proposal contains a long appendix you are free to ignore it if you wish.

Duplication: Does the proposed research substantially duplicate any ongoing or previous research that you are aware of? Would the proposed research result in the development of a technology or product that already exists? If the PI has received or has applied for patent(s) pertaining to the proposed technology, does the proposed research constitute a legitimate feasibility study, or does it substantially duplicate earlier work carried out by the PI?

Reviewer's Recommendation: Summarize your recommendation in terms of the final action that SBIR should consider. **Please do not give your score in the text of your review**, but instead check your score at the top of the review screen that you will access through the PRS system. **A rating of excellent implies a high priority for funding, while a rating of good suggests a low priority for funding.** Lower ratings will have little chance of funding.